



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** May 28, 2020

**Agenda Item:** C. Ben White Memorial FAS Acquisition and Development (R2)

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

## **Background:**

FWP proposes to acquire approximately 97 acres of private land along the West Fork of the Bitterroot River, for creation of the C. Ben White Memorial Fishing Access Site. The proposed acquisition would expand the 1.5-acre W. W. White Memorial FAS, which is a popular site to launch and take out boats on the river and is FWP's only FAS on the West Fork. The proposed acquisition would include approximately 0.5 mile of the main stem of the West Fork, 0.5 mile of side channels, 68 acres of associated riparian habitat, and 19 acres of upland habitat. The proposed FAS would share approximately 0.5 mile of boundary with adjacent National Forest land, and would permanently protect access, recreation, and wildlife values at the gateway of the West Fork canyon. Proposed developments include expanded day-use improvements, a small campground with one to three sites, river-bottom and upland parking areas, two vault latrines, and walking trails. The existing boat-launch area would mostly remain the same with possible minor improvements. Fishing, hunting, and wildlife-watching opportunities would increase as a result of the additional acreage.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results:**

A draft environmental assessment was made available for 30-day public comment in February. The EA was posted on FWP's website, and legal notices were published twice each in 3 local and regional newspapers. FWP sent printed EA copies and emails of the EA's availability to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies. FWP received 24 emailed comments from 19 individuals and five groups (Bitterrooters for Planning, Five Valleys Audubon, Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Montana Wildlife Federation, and Ravalli County Off Road User Association [RCORUA]). In summary, 22 commenters (including all groups except RCORUA) supported the acquisition and development, one commenter (RCORUA) opposed the proposal, and one person did not indicate specific support or opposition.

## **Alternatives and Analysis:**

No action is the only viable alternative, which would leave the property in private ownership. The property is under imminent threat of development given its prime location along a popular recreational river and access to adjacent National Forest land, as well as adjacent/nearby residential development. Subdivision or similar development would diminish fish and wildlife habitat values and likely result in no public access. The current landowners have received multiple offers from private buyers but opted to give FWP the opportunity because they prefer to see the land protected and open to the public.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale:**

FWP recommends that this purchase and development be completed. The project is strongly supported in the local area and by most sportspersons' groups commenting.

## **Proposed Motion:**

I move the commission approve FWP's proposal to purchase and develop C. Ben White Memorial FAS in Region 2.